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ABSTRACT

Survival Skills for Youth (SSY) is a life skills management program developed for out-of-school youth who have a history of failure in academic or employment settings, or who are considered at-risk for failure in the adult world of work. The skills taught are grouped into 10 areas, one skill category per workshop. The workshops include up to 15 participants who work together in activities that emphasize analysis, practice, and generalization of skills, and provide positive peer support and feedback. The program is organized and delivered via the collaborative efforts of education and noneducation agencies. Ten groups totaling 114 youth aged 12-18 participated in SSY in rural areas of Missouri and Tennessee. Participants included: court-adjudicated youth; youth in foster care, alternative public schools, and summer youth employment programs; dropouts; and youth with emotional or behavior problems. Interagency partnerships were found to be an effective means of providing extracurricular life skills workshops to these at-risk rural youth. Pre- and post-evaluations covered knowledge of life management concepts, self-esteem, social skills, and participant satisfaction. Results show that the workshops were effective in changing the attitudes and behaviors of the participants. Participants responded positively to the satisfaction survey. Eleven bar graphs present results. (Contains 18 references.) (TD)

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Practical Partnerships:

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Abstract

Working with at-risk youth presents unique challenges for agencies and organizations. This study describes the results of a life skills management program, Survival Skills for Youth, which was organized and delivered to rural youth via collaborative efforts of education and non-education agencies. The program was implemented in 10 groups of rural youth in Tennessee and Missouri (N=114). All programs were a collaborative effort of two or more organizations, such as University Extension, school districts, juvenile justice programs, and state human service or workforce development programs. Inter-agency partnerships were shown to be an effective means of providing extra-curricular life skills management workshops for at-risk rural students. Pre and post evaluations of knowledge of life management concepts, self-esteem, and social skills showed the workshops to be effective in changing the attitudes and behaviors of youth. Performance and generalization of the skills natural settings was also demonstrated.

Practical Partnerships: A Cooperative Life Skills Program for At-Risk Rural Youth

Many youth in rural areas face a risk of lifelong economic and social harm, inadequate educational attainment, chronic dependency and uncertain future in the job market (Dorrell, 1993; DeYoung, 1994). With the increasing rate of rural poverty, and the movement of living-wage employment to suburban areas, rural youth may need special programming to improve their chances of economic and personal success in adulthood.

Working with at-risk youth presents unique challenges for rural agencies and organizations. Education agencies are in a special position to enhance the experiences and improve the educational and skill level of at-risk rural youth; however, other local and state agencies have a mission that easily coincides with the role of education. The paucity of resources and professional personnel in many rural areas require inter-agency collaboration for services for rural students and families. This study describes the results of a life skills management program, Survival Skills for Youth, which was organized and delivered to rural youth via collaborative efforts of education and non-education agencies. The Survival Skills for Youth program is a ten session training series which was designed specifically for at-risk youth, ages 14 - 21

(youth not in school or at risk for school failure or drop out). This paper describes the content and implementation of the program and analyzes the effects of the program on the skills, behaviors, and attitudes of the participants.

Program and Participants

This study presents the analysis and results of providing collaborative life management skills programming (Survival Skills for Youth, SSY) for at-risk rural youth. One hundred fourteen youth made up ten groups which were facilitated by seven trained youth workers in rural areas of two very rural states, Missouri and Tennessee. Partnering agencies were one or more of these groups: juvenile justice, University Extension, public schools, alternative schools, state or county Department of Human Services, and Department of Labor summer youth program (JTPA). All participants were referred to a public agency which serves at-risk youth and their families.

Groups were facilitated by agency staff, teachers, or volunteers who had been trained to implement the program. These Facilitators conducted groups with seven to 15 young men and women per group. Participants ranged in age from 13 to 18 years. All youth qualified for special programs based on the income of their families, adjudication, or referral from a school. Reported reading

grade levels ranged from 2.4 to 9.9 with a mean of 6.4 (for ninth through twelfth grade level participants). Math grade levels ranged from 4.9 to 11.5 with a mean of 7.2.

The groups attended the ten workshops of the SSY program. Each workshop is three hours long with two brief breaks. Nutritious snacks were served at the second break. Brief pretests and post tests were given at the beginning and end of each workshop. In addition to the activities carried out within the workshop setting, participants completed take home generalization project, called Action Plans, for each workshop.

Survival Skills for Youth is a competency-based life skills training program which promotes confidence, competence, and motivation needed to improve success in educational, social, and employment settings. The program described here builds on theoretical and conceptual foundations of behavioral education and on previous work with single mothers receiving AFDC or on transition from abusive situations, divorce, or chronic unemployment (Greenwood, Carta, Hart, Thurston, & Hall, 1989; Thurston, 1989; Thurston, 1995; Thurston, 1999; York, 1998). SSY was developed for out-of-school youth who have a history of failure in academic or employment settings or who are considered at-risk for success in the adult world of work. The program uses a

variety of methods proven successful with difficult-to-reach students. It focuses in functional school-to-work transition skills such as communication skills, money management, dealing with conflict, assertiveness, team building, self-monitoring, study skills, problem solving, getting and keeping a job, and self-reinforcement. Primary considerations for the development of SSY were also resiliency factors (Garmezy, 1991; Bernard, 1991) and proven successful strategies (Legters and McDill, 1994; Thurston, 1995).

For each workshop, a participant receives a workbook which contain valuable life skill information and activities which promote the maintenance and generalization of new behaviors. The skills taught are grouped into 10 skills areas, one category per workshop. Table 1 lists the names of the workshops and primary objectives and some of the specific competencies produced by the program.

Tables 1 about here

The workshops include up to 15 participants who work together in activities which emphasize analysis, practice, and generalization of skills, and provide positive support and feedback from peers. Participants self-monitor workshop participation and related behaviors such as showing respect for themselves and others,

being on time, helping others, paying attention, bringing materials, completing activities, staying alert, and leading review sessions. The program also incorporates important considerations in gender differences and cross-gender interactions.

Facilitator used program materials which include a script for each workshop, flip charts, activity and game cards and materials, and a videotape about sexual harassment. Special components of the program are: Action Plans, Scoreboards, Planning and Reviewing Processes, workshop pre- and post-tests, incentives, and graduation celebrations and certificates.

Collaborative efforts

In rural areas, it may be easier to recognize the interdependence of schools and other community organizations and institutions. A sense of community and smallness of scale (Herzog & Pittman, 1995), close personal and social relationships among students, teachers, and parents (Ayalon, 1995), and a sense of oneness among community members and community "connectedness" (Smithmier, 1994) represent the qualities of rural life. Cooperation and participation are traditional concepts in rural areas: rural cooperatives are common and have been the keystone to rural economic viability (Smithmier, 1994). For these reasons and because of scarcity of resources and lower numbers of students,

collaborative efforts enhance services and opportunities for rural students who are considered at-risk for failure (Rossi, Vergun, & Weise, 1997). Each of the groups described in this study was organized and implemented as a result of collaborative efforts of two or more agencies who served at-risk rural youth. In the Missouri groups, the project was spearheaded by Missouri Extension educators who partnered with various community organizations such as schools and group homes. The Tennessee Facilitators were employees of JTPA / Workforce Development organizations and they partnered with the juvenile court, the Department of Human Services, and other local community groups. Although the group facilitators implemented SSY, partnering organizations provided space for the workshops; incentives, gifts, and graduation presents and celebrations; refreshments at the workshops, referrals to the program, transportation, and workshop materials. Putting together these community resources and sharing expenses made the program possible in these rural areas. In addition, some of the organizations did not have enough youth participants to make up a group, so the collaborative efforts allowed youth to be served who would not otherwise have had the opportunity to take part in the life skills management program.

Measures

Before starting the three hour workshops, all participants were asked to sign a consent form. Parents' signatures were obtained for all participants under 18 years old. Two of the groups were given more extensive pre and posttest measures at a pre-program session. During this session the participants completed a series of three measures. Completing the measures took approximately 30 minutes.

Measures of program effectiveness used at all sites were:

1. Participation and completion. Participation was measured by attendance. Facilitators recorded attendance for each session on a Workshop Data Report worksheet, one for each of the ten workshops. Each youth had to attend eight out of the ten workshops to receive a graduation certificate.

2. Workshop quizzes. Workshop pre- and post-tests were used to measure understanding and application of the key concepts and skills of each session. Tests were made up of ten items based on the learning objectives for each workshop. The post-test was an alternate version of the pretest.

3. Generalization of skills. The completion of Action Plans and Survival Stories was used to evaluate the generalization of skills taught in the workshops to the lives of the youth participants. Facilitators recorded the completion of Action Plans by collecting

them at the beginning of each session after the Reviewing Process in which SSY participants discussed their projects in pairs. The maximum number of Action Plans was nine per participant. Action Plans are plans participants make during the workshop to apply a new skill to a problem or issue in their lives. These plans are made cooperatively with others and the plans are then carried out before the next workshop. Survival Stories are very brief written reports of the use of survival skills from previous workshops. Examples of Survival Stories are seen in Table 2.

Table 2 about here

Additional measures at several sites were:

1. Social Skills. The Social Skills Rating System (Gresham & Elliot, (1990) was used to measure self-ratings of four social skills factors: assertiveness, cooperation, responsibility, and self-control. The questionnaire was made up of 39 "I" statements such as I make friends easily", "I disagree with adults without fighting or arguing", and "I listen to my friend when they talk about problems they are having." The instrument asks youth to rate "a lot of things that students your age may do" in terms of whether they never do it (0), sometimes do it (1) or always do it (2). They are then asked to rate

each behavior according to whether it is not important (0), important (2), or critical (3). The instrument provides an individual score for each of the 4 factors as well as a total standard score and percentile.

2. Self-Esteem. Self-esteem was measured by the Self-Esteem Inventory (SEI) (Coopersmith 1981). This instrument was designed to measure attitudes toward self in social, academic, family, and personal areas of experience. Self-esteem is seen as an expression of approval or disapproval, indicating the extent to which a person believes himself or herself to be competent, successful, significant, and worthy (Coopersmith, 1967). The adult form was used in this research.

3. SSY Participant Satisfaction Questionnaire. A consumer satisfaction instrument was completed with the posttest battery. There were 25 questions which were answered by checking one of these: completely satisfied, satisfied, neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, dissatisfied, completely dissatisfied. There were four open-ended questions: Please tell us what you think about SSY. What did you like about SSY? What did you dislike about SSY? and Are there changes you think we should make?

Data were analyzed using a chi square of frequency and an anova. The analysis showed that the participants had high

attendance rates, improved in pre-post quizzes, and generalized learned skills to settings outside the workshop.

Results

Data from ten groups who participated in the SSY workshops are included in this study. These groups were held in high schools, a group home and alternative school for court-adjudicated boys, alternative public schools, and summer youth employment programs sponsored by JTPA. The impact of the program will be described by group, then results of combined consumer satisfaction, self-esteem, and world view data will be described.

Composite data

The overall average attendance for the 114 SSY participants was 84% and the graduation rate (attending eight out of ten workshops) was 75%. The average number of Action Plans per group was 54 over the course of the ten workshops, and each group brough an average of 30 Survival Stories.

Pre-post score comparisons were made across all groups for each workshop. Workshop pretest averages ranged from 0% to 90 and posttest averages ranged from 10 to 100. Data were analyzed using a chi square of frequency and an anova. All changes were positive at the .0001 level of significance (p=.0001).

Case Studies

Patti worked with two groups of youth in a small rural Missouri community. Her implementations were collaborative efforts of several agencies including the Departments of Human Services and Juvenile Justice, University Extension, and public housing. The first group were 13 youth in foster care and the workshops were held in a public housing community center. Patti's second group was made up of referrals from juvenile justice and children of participants in her Survival Skills for Women group. This group consisted of 10 participants. The pre to post changes for the first group ranged from 55% improvement to 81% improvement, with an average pretest score of 25% and an average postest score of 88% (See Figure 1). Patti's second group had an average pretest score of 19% and an average posttest score of 74%, with improvement scores ranging from 30% to 67% (See Figure 2). Seven from each group earned graduation certificates at the completion party following the workshop series.

Figures 1 and 2 here

Carol conducted groups in a locked facility (Youth Ranch) in rural Missouri which collaborated with Missouri Extension to conduct the program with the young men and women in their

custody. The Youth Ranch is an in-house detention center for "troubled" youth who are in trouble with the law, trouble at home, or have developmental and emotional problems. Figures 3, 4, and 5, show the pre to post means for the ten workshops of Survival Skills for Youth. Carol's graduation average completion rate for these three groups was 82%. The average pre to posttest gain was 58% for Group 3, 46% for Group 4, and 60% for group 5.

Figures 3, 4, & 5 about here

Charla worked with at-risk youth in a rural Missouri high school. Her program was a collaboration between the school and Missouri Extension. Pretest averages in her group ranges from 14% to 47% and posttest averages of 32% to 94%. The total mean pretest was 25% and posttest was 68% (See Figure 6). All the students in the group were flunking school, according to Charla, and they were very responsive to the workshop format and materials. Most of the participants in this group brought Action Plans and Survival Stories to demonstrate their application of the life skills beyond the classroom. Students became competitive in bringing Survival Stories and the number of stories increased to a total of 73 brought by the group at the last workshop. There were seven in this group

and the average attendance was 6.3.

Figure 6 here

Beverly provided SSY for a two-county alternative school in rural Missouri. Her group, a collaborative effort of the school district and Extension Service, were ten participants aged 15 - 20 who had been out of the regular school setting or who needed a special setting to catch up to return to school to earn graduation credits. The name of the school was D.R.E.A.M.E.R.S and the group named themselves The Dream Team as part of a culminating activity for the workshop series. The Dream Team raised their test scores from an average of 20% at pretest level (7% - 37%) to 97% at the postest level (94% - 100%) (See Figure 7). They also brought a total of 79 completed Action Plans and 24 Survival Stories to demonstrate generalization of skills.

Figure 7 here

In rural Tennessee, Belinda facilitated a SSY workshop series for a residential alternative school for boys who were in state custody. The group was sponsored by JTPA, the Community Career

Center, the school, and the Department of Human Services. The 16 young men ranged from 14 - 17 years. Pretest averages ranged from 11% to 55% at pretest level (mean = 36%) and 53% to 91% at posttest level (See Figure 8). Belinda's group brought a total of 114 completed Action Plans and 26 Survival Stories. The average attendance of the group was 15 and 13 completed eight out of ten of the workshops.

Figure 8 about here

Teresa and Edith were facilitators for a regional JTPA agency in northeast Tennessee who conducted SSY for disadvantged youth in the JTPA summer youth program. Edith worked with JTPA summer youth at a high school in the Appalacian region of Tennessee. Her group included students from an alternative school, a juvenile offender, and two students with disabilities. The ranged in age from 16 - 19 years and all but one was behind in both reading and math. Her group consisted of four boys and five girls. Figure 9 shows the workshop average pre and posttest scores for Edith's group. The average attendance for her group of 12 was ten and eight of them earned certificates at the graduation celebration.

Teresa's group were aged16 - 18 and they were all below grade

level in reading and math. Her group averages improved from 37% to 77% for the series (See Figure 10). The group brought 62 completed Action Plans and 58 Survival Stories. An example of a Survival Story from Teresa's group: Last night at Burger King we had already had cleaned the dinning room thena whole van lode of kids came in I was furious. I still said "welcome to Burger King, May I take your order please" and smiled instead of taking it out on them.

Figures 9 & 10 here

Participants in Belinda's, Edith's and Teresa's groups completed several pre - post measures to assess changes in self-esteem and social skills. These groups also completed an extensive consumer satisfaction survey. Some of these data for these measures will be grouped because of the small number of respondants and the nature of the groups.

Social Skills

Participants rated themselves on how often them used appropriate social skills and how important they thought that specific appropriate social skills were. Belinda's group of boys in the group home completed both parts of the social skills inventory at pre and posttest levels. Subskill areas of cooperation, assertion,

empathy, and self-control all showed pre to post improvements. The pre standard score of the group for "how often" the used the skills was 89.5, which put the group at the 21st percentile for secondary boys. This improved at posttest to an average standard score of 103, which is the 62st percentile of all high school boys.

In rating the importance of the subskill areas, the young men in the group showed improvement in two of the areas, cooperation and empathy. The group average standard score improved from 52.5 to 86.3 with an improvement from a lower than the second percentile of all high school boys to the 19th percentile of all high school boys.

Self-Esteem

The Coopersmith self-esteem inventory was used at pre and posttest levels for the three Tennessee groups. Pretest scores ranged from 0 - 100 at pretest level and 16 - 100 at posttest. Belinda's group moved from an average of 60.5 at pretest to 74 after the program; Edith's group moved from 68 to 70; and Teresa's group showed a negative change from 55 - 51.

Trobridge (1972), using the school form, found 71.4 to be the norm in his sample of low socio-economic youth. A study with college and community college students in northern California (Coopersmith, 1981) produced norms of 66.7 (adult form) for

students aged 16 - 19. The adult form of the SEI was used in this research. Using the Trobridge and Coopersmith standards, only 24% and 34% of the students in this study who completed the SEI inventory were at or above these norms at pretest level and although improvements were shown in the percentage at or above the norms at posttest level, only 34% (from 24%) were at or above the Trobridge norm and only 52% (from 50%) were at or above the Coopersmith norm after completion of the program.

Significant improvement in self-esteem was not expected over the few weeks of the program; however, using previously established norms for the low-income participants demonstrated some improvements. A surprising result of this study was that so many of the students in the study were significantly lower that previously established norms.

Participant Satisfaction

SSY participants responded positively to the satisfaction survey. For example, to the question "Please tell us what you think about SSY", sample answers were: "I think it is fun and interesting but it's just we got to have more hours."; "I thought it was fun and a good program.If I could I'd do it all over again."; "Cause it helped me get along with others."'; "Are (sic) group took out time to listen to are (sic) problems and stay. Also I learn a little too control my

temper."; I liked it because we discuss everything in groups."; "I think it was a lot of fun and should be passed on."; and "This program taught me alot what I didn't know, and How to work it out."

The group was very positive about the program, the facilitators, and what they learned from the program. A summary of these data are seen in Figure 11.

Figure 11 here

Conclusions

These collaborative efforts of agencies and organization whose goals and missions were to promote positive futures for rural students who are considered at-risk, demonstrate positive effects on the youth served in this 30-contact hour program. Further research is being done to evaluate the long term effects of the program on the participants and to gather information from peers and adults on their perceptions of changes in attitudes and behaviors of program graduates.

The organizations collaborating in the implementation of this life skills management program for youth were pleased with the results of the program. The facilitator in each case shared the data

and the results with collaborators and in most cases all took part in the graduation celebrations of the groups. Because of few numbers of youth who qualified for the program in some rural areas, combining efforts and numbers allowed the program to be offered in some areas where it would not have been possible for organizations acting along. In addition, working partnerships were established or enhanced for future efforts for rural students and families.

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Figure 1

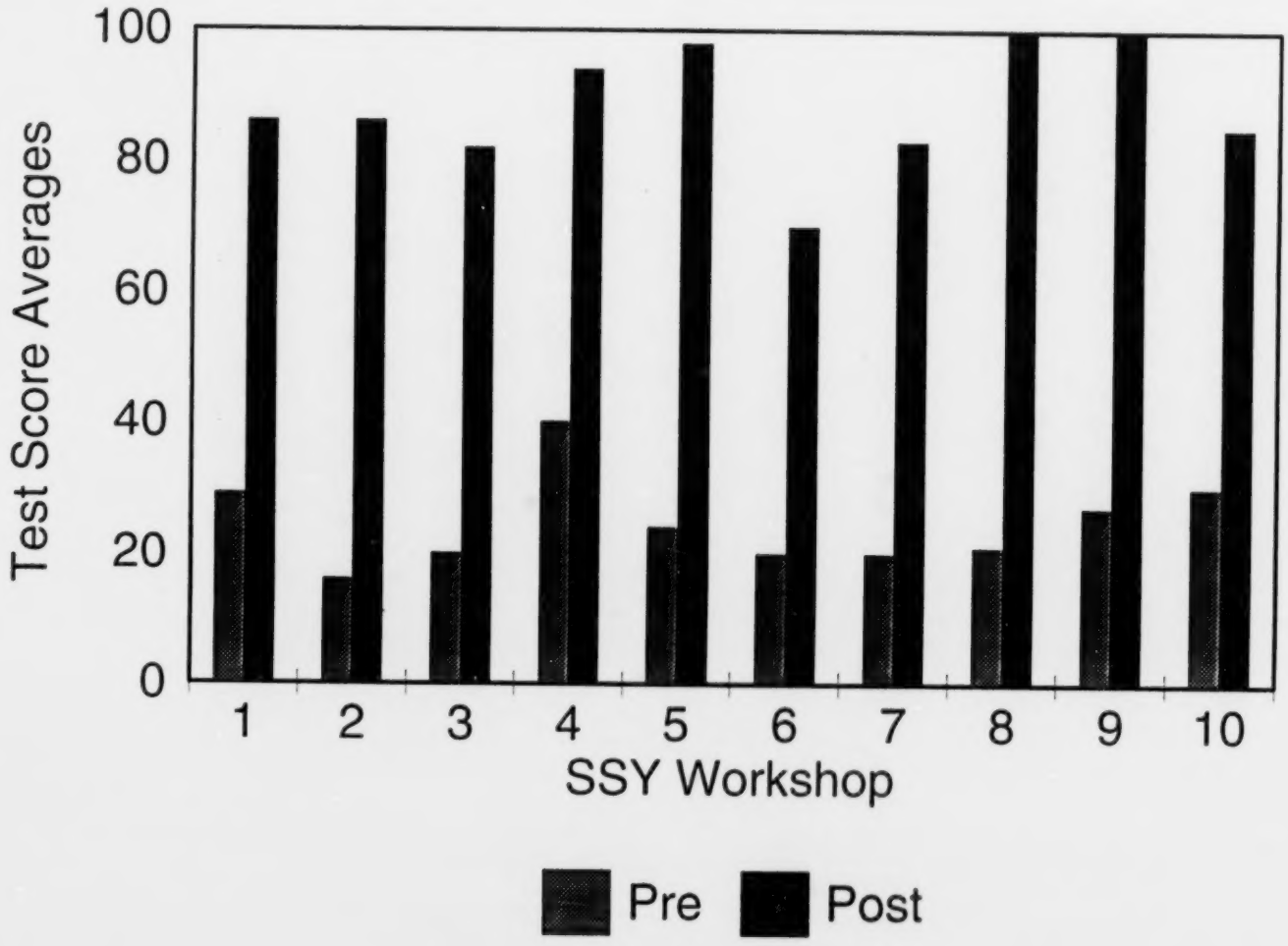
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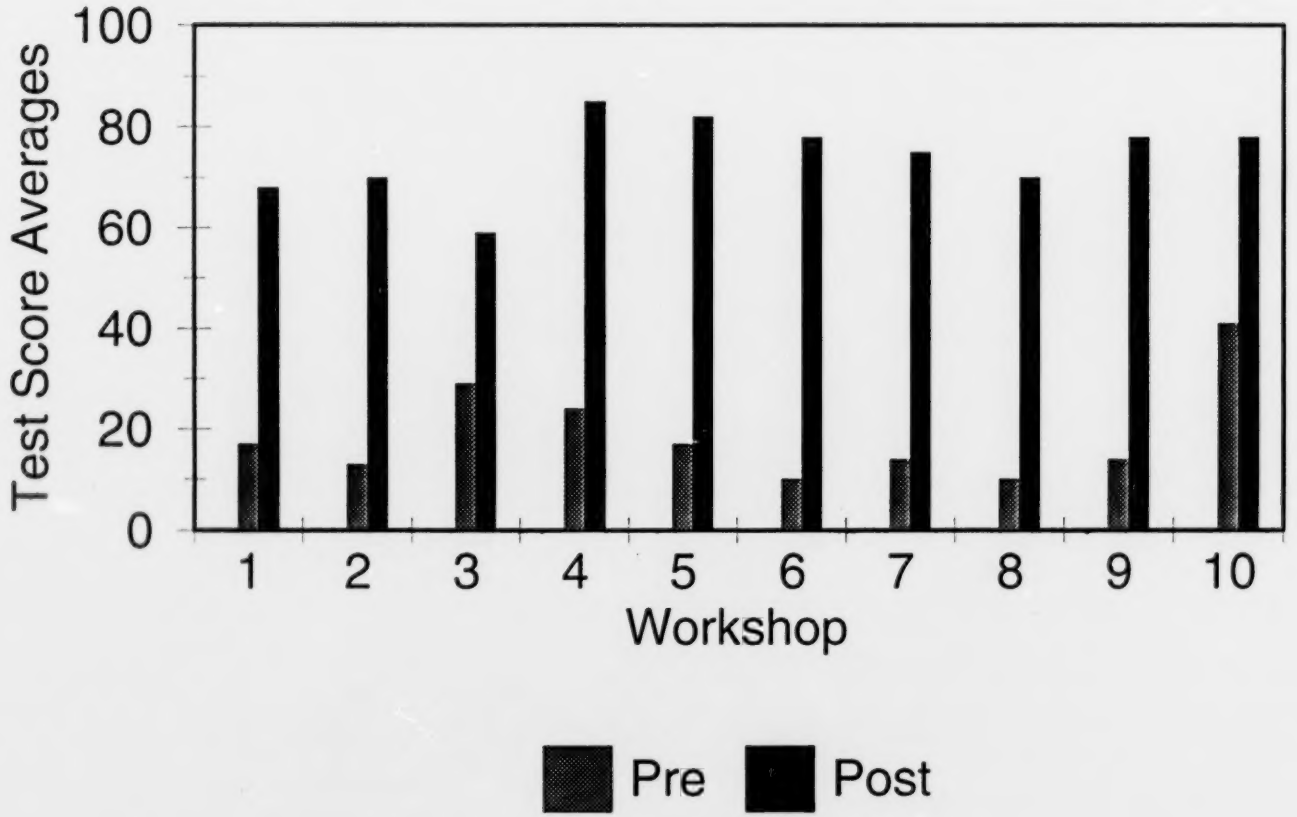
Figure 2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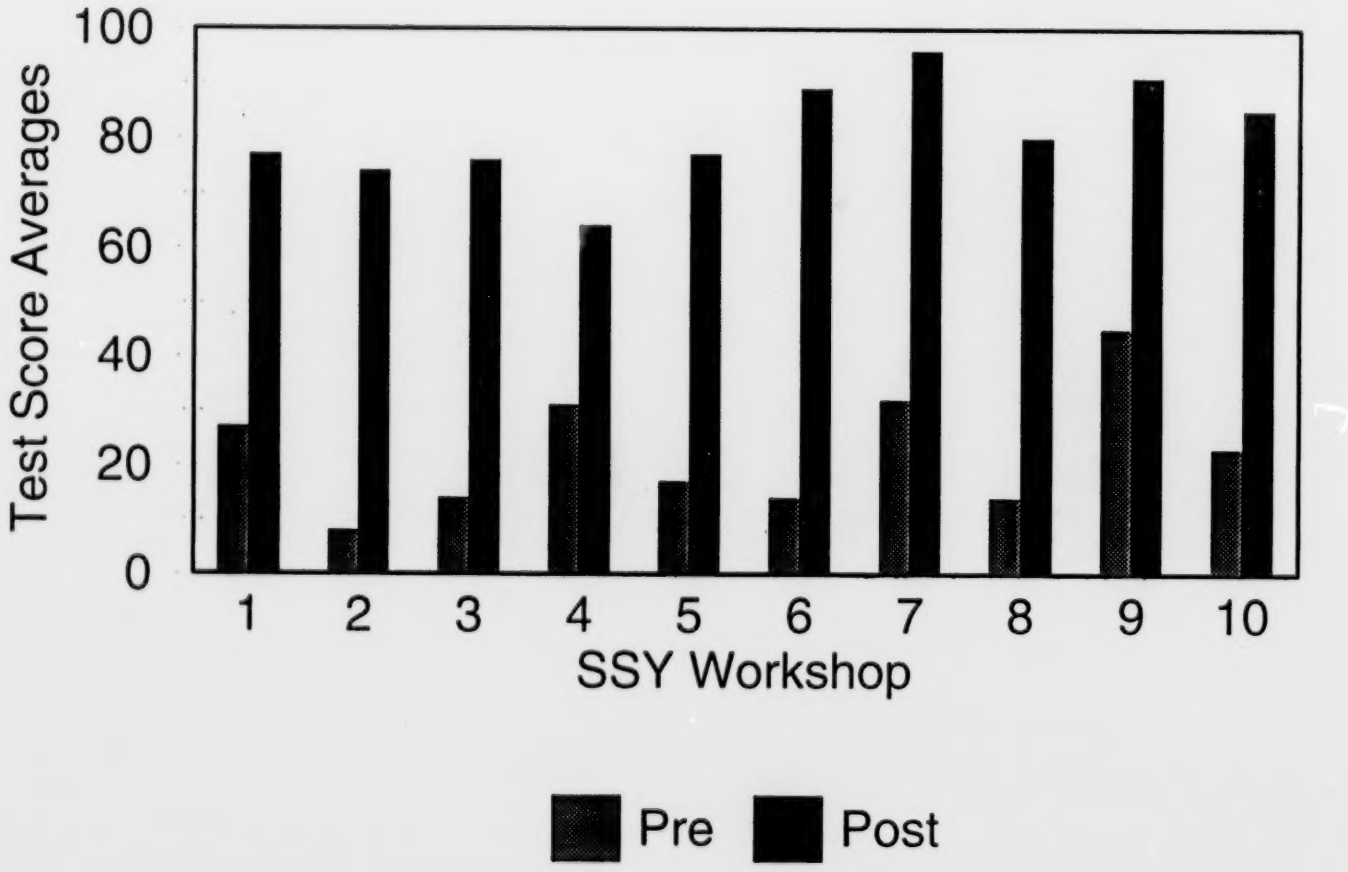
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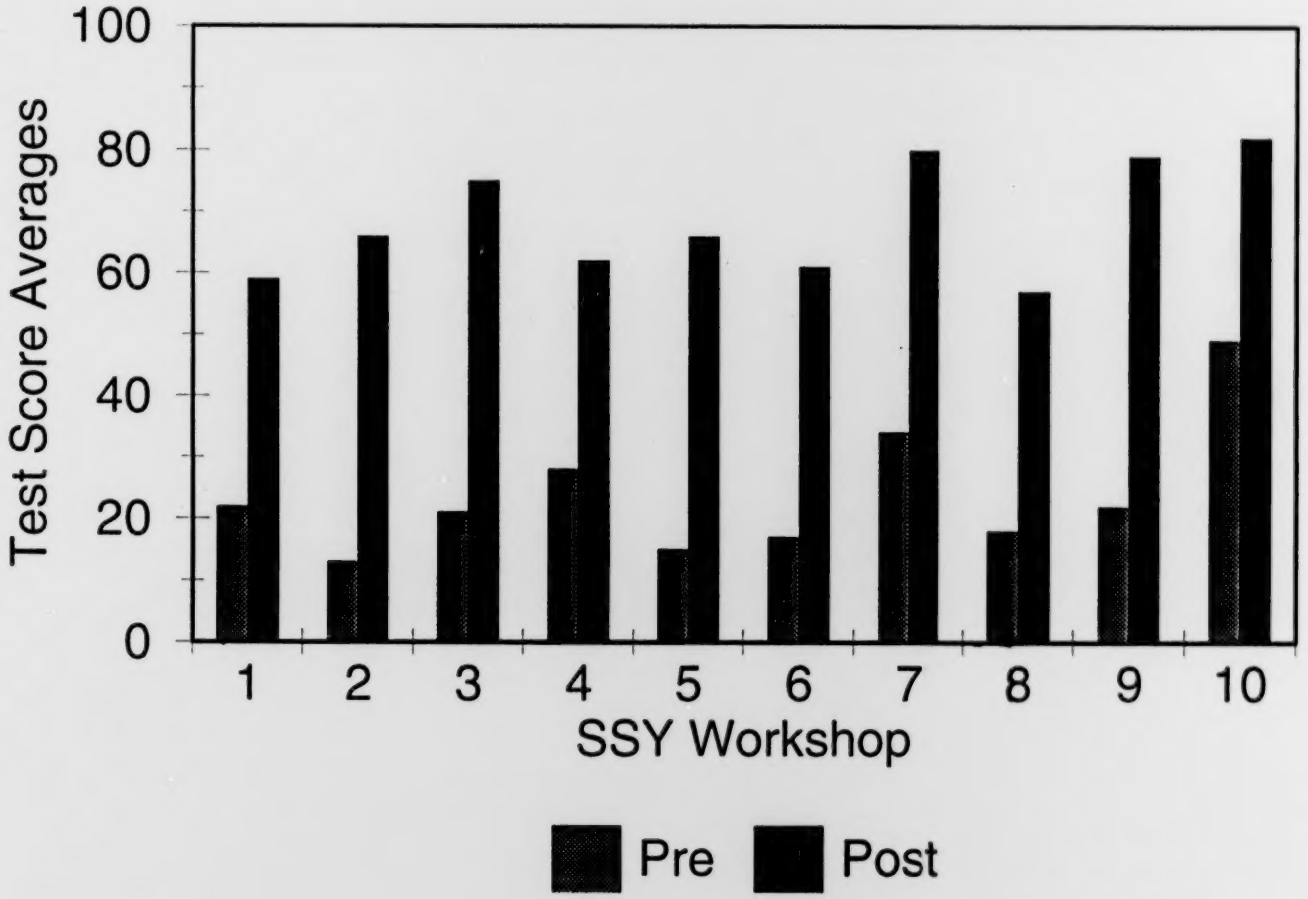
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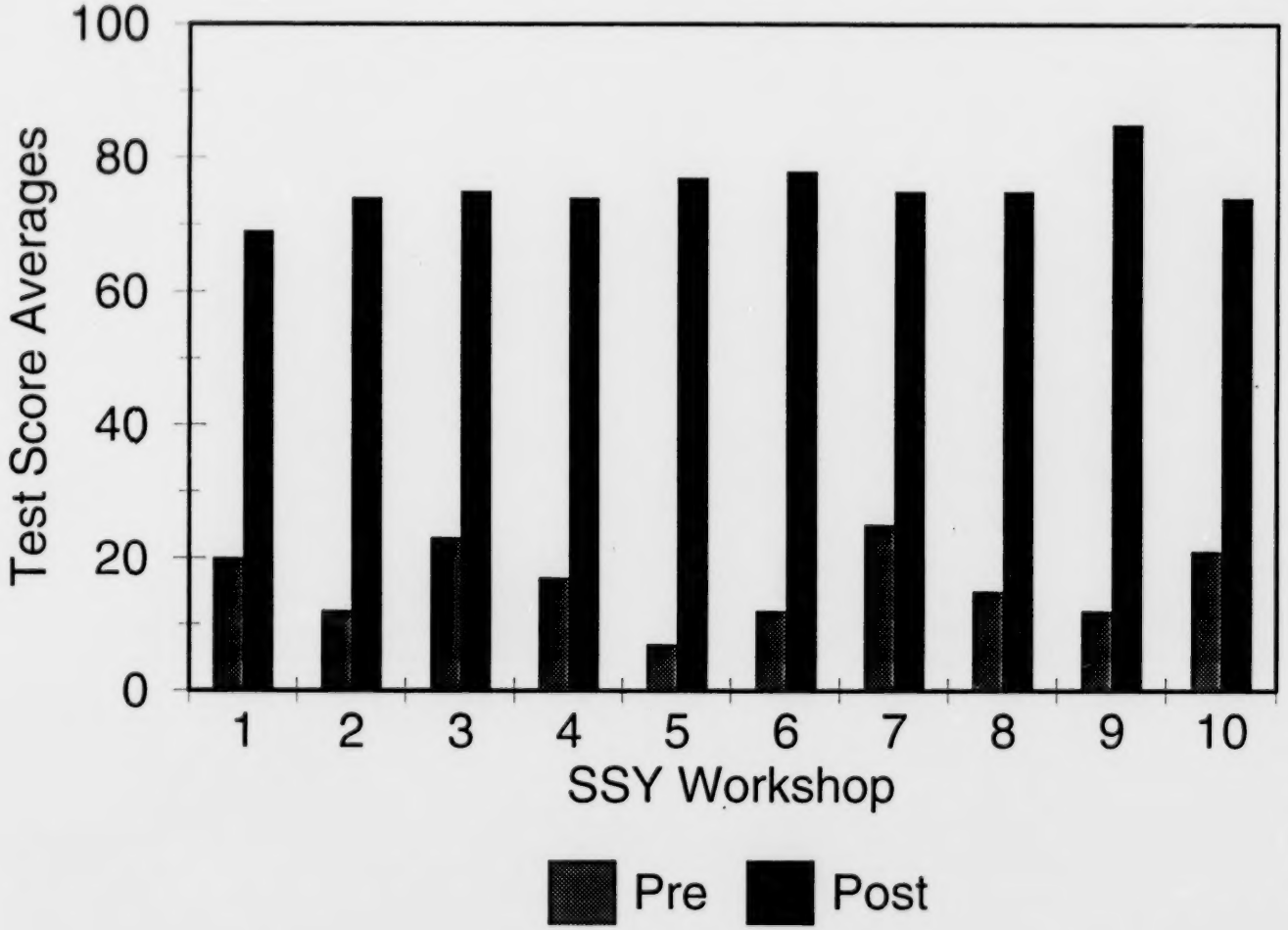
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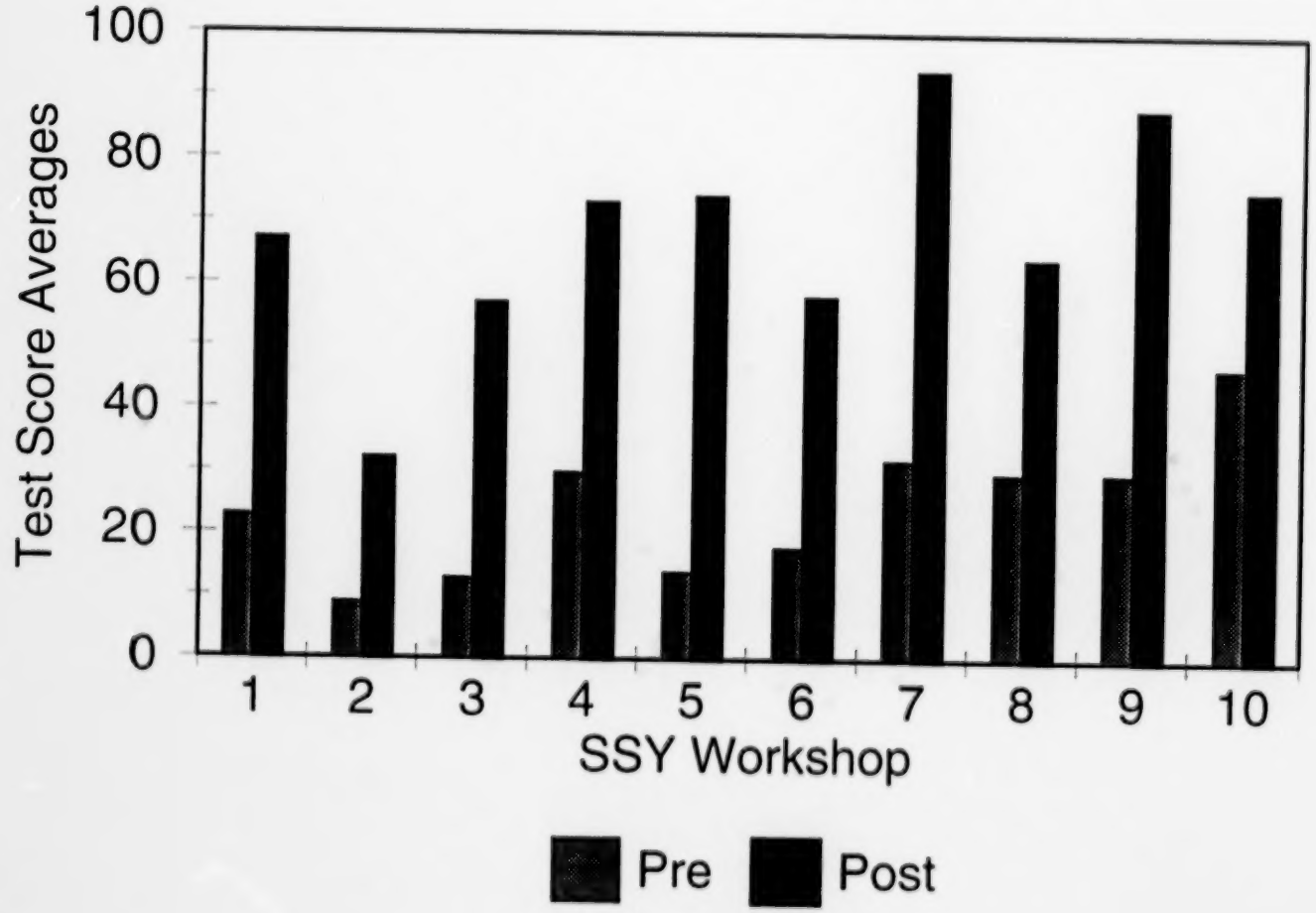
Figure 6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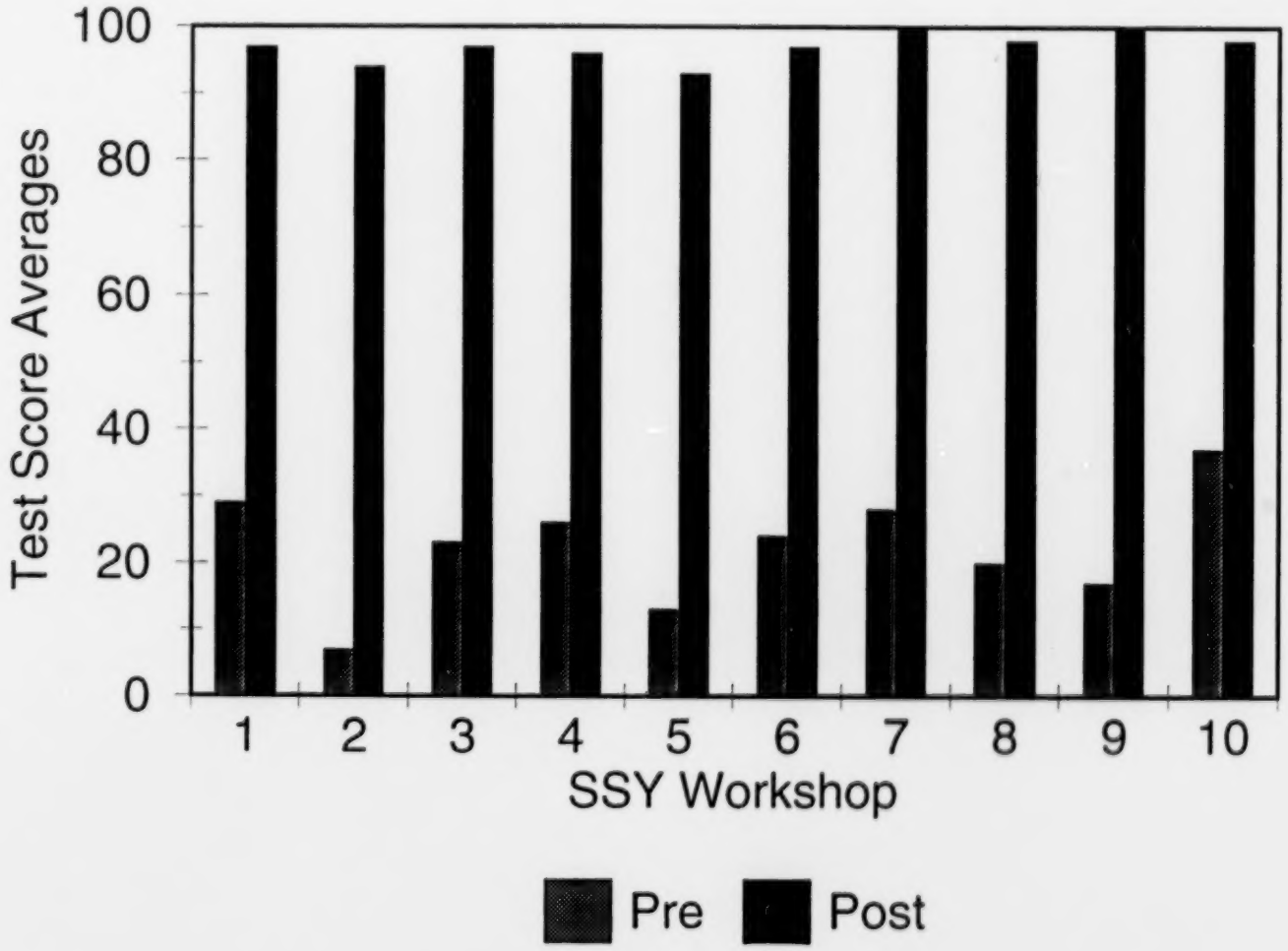
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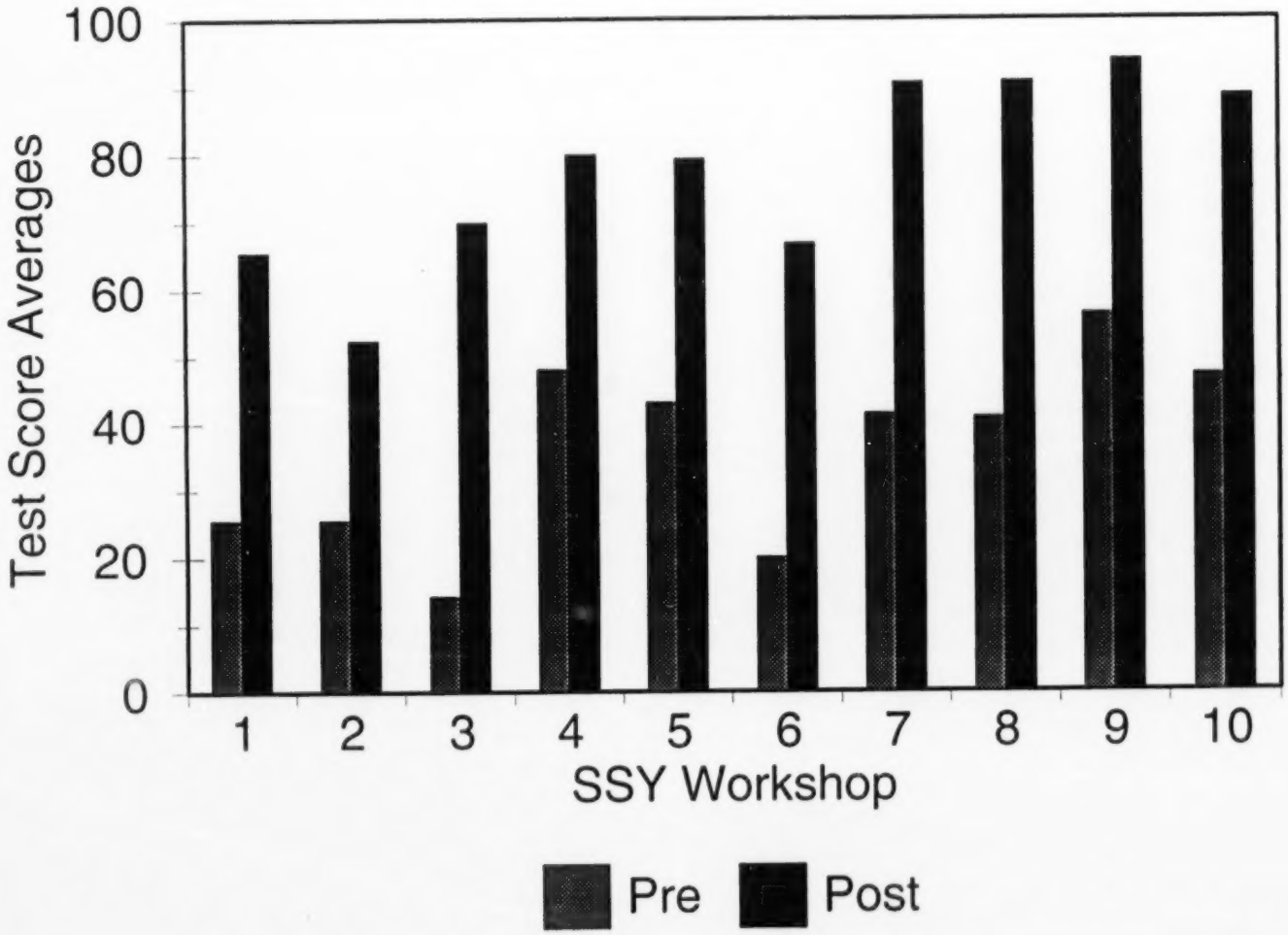
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Post

Figure 9

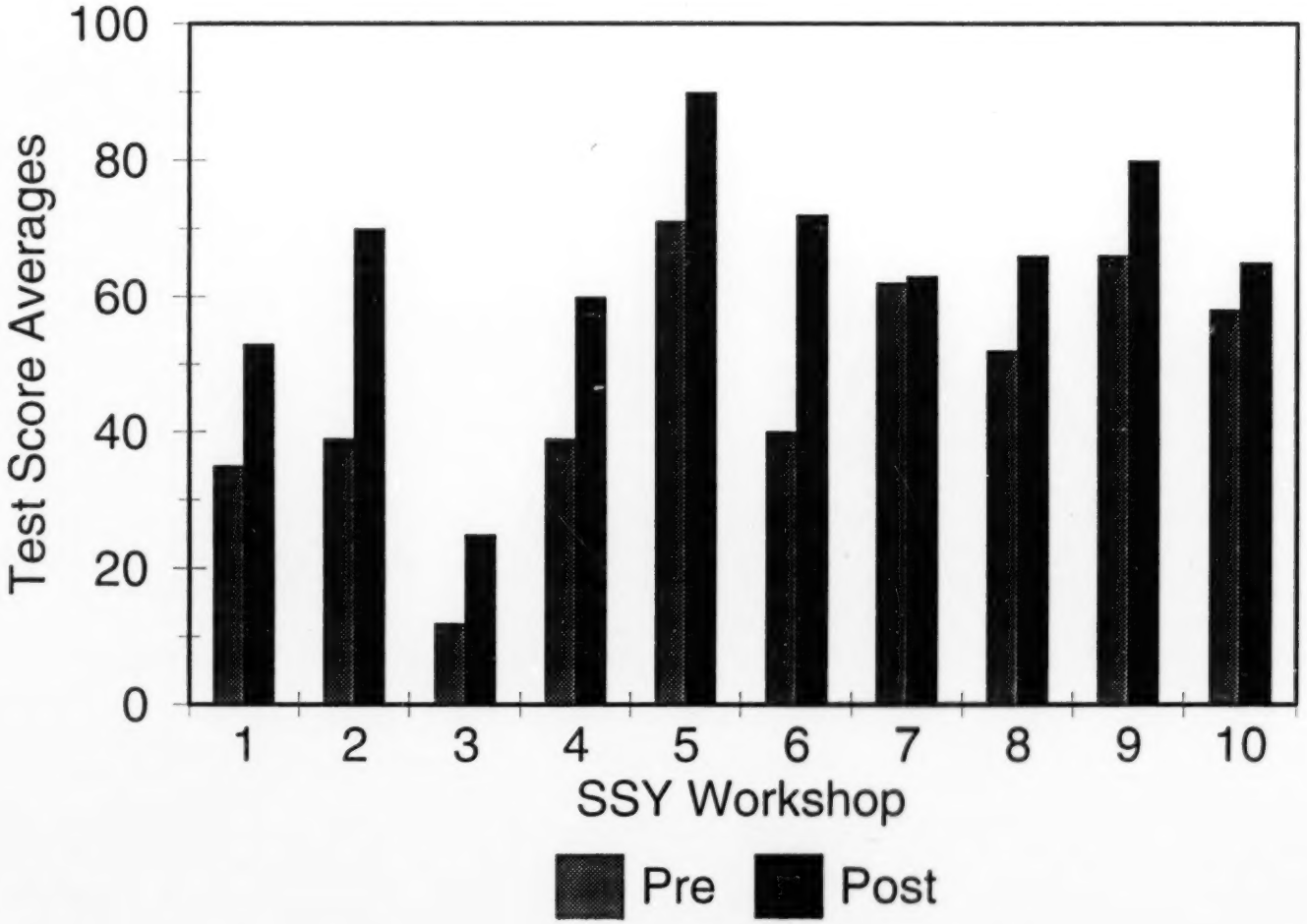

100
80
60
40
20
0
Test Score Averages
1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
SSY Workshop
Pre
Post

Figure 10

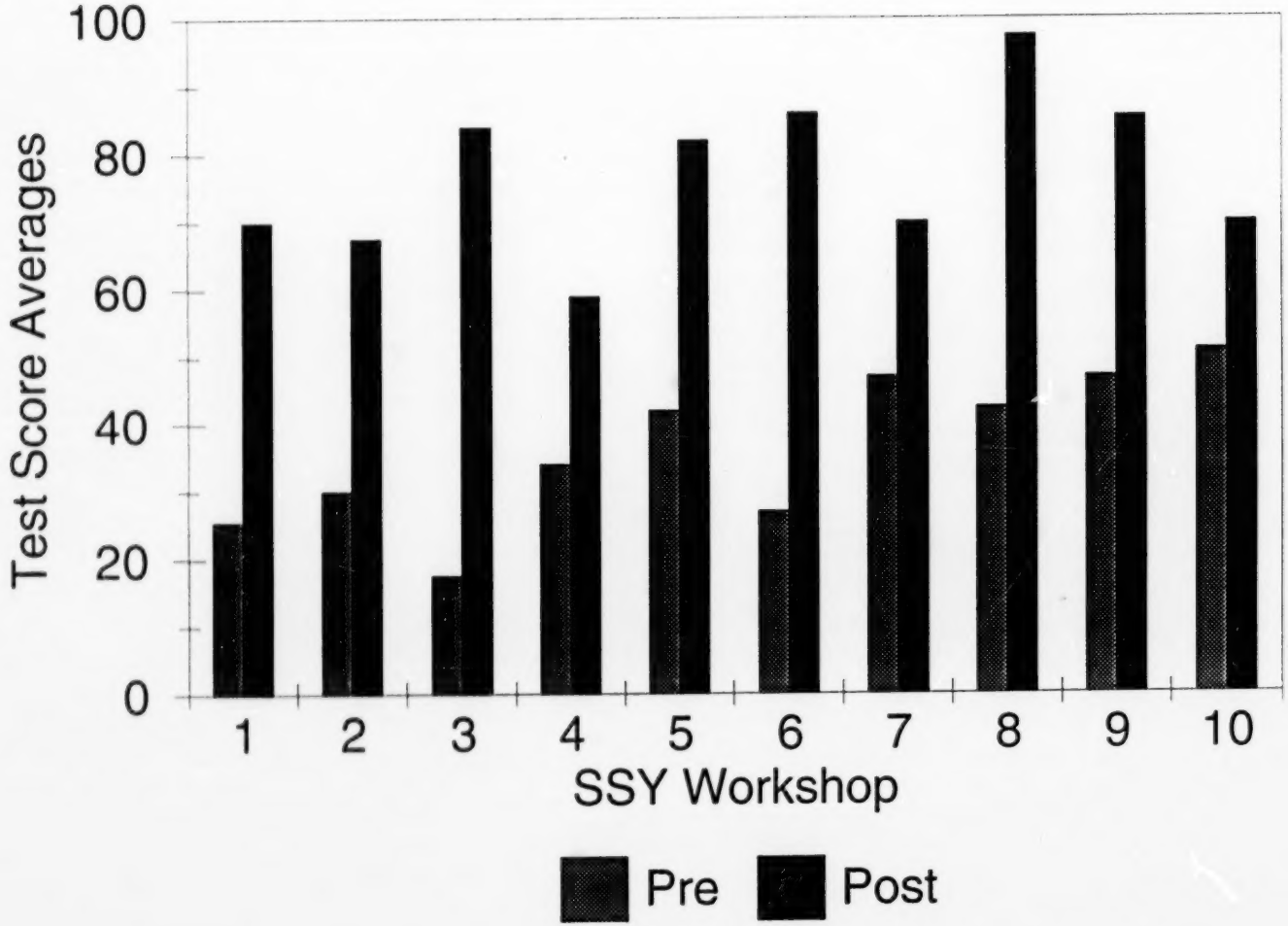
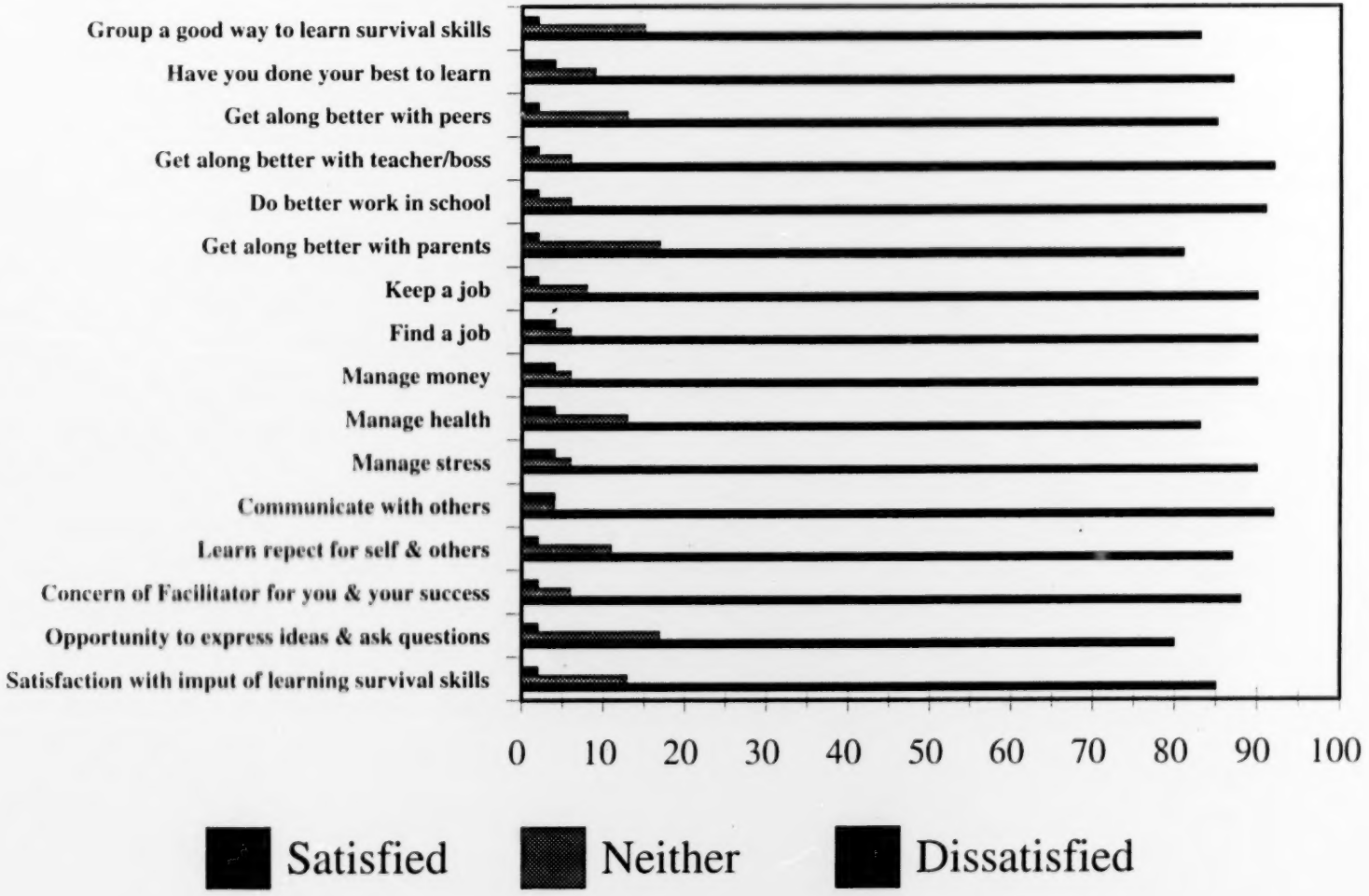

100
80
60
40
20
0
Test Score Averages
1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
SSY Workshop
Pre
Post

Figure 11


Group a good way to learn survival skills
Have you done your best to learn
Get along better with peers
Get along better with teacher/boss
Do better work in school
Get along better with parents
Keep a job
Find a job
Manage money
Manage health
Manage stress
Communicate with others
Learn repect for self & others
Concern of Facilitator for you & your success
Opportunity to express ideas & ask questions
Satisfaction with imput of learning survival skills
0
10
20
30
40
50
60
70
80
90
100
Satisfied
Neither
Dissatisfied